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AUTHOR Cooper, Stephen
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ABSTRACT

Because President Lyndon Johnson understood well the publicity value of the American news media, he sought to exploit them. He saw reporters as "torch bearers" for his programs and policies and used the presidential press conference chiefly for promotional purposes. Although he met with reporters often, his press conferences were usually impromptu, which discouraged thorough preparation by newspeople. Often he denied public access and scrutiny, which broadcast conferences afford. He was generally uncomfortable when reporters had him at a disadvantage. He overused the prerogative of the opening statement through excessive length and by narrowing the scope of possible news inquiry. He also limited his effectiveness because of his frequent unresponsiveness through controlling, fencing, and evading. While he was able to give useful answers, he usually failed to respond directly to news reporters and generally let his own purposes dominate in the news conference. In general, President Johnson was probably effective in using the press conference to satisfy his own aims--especially to gain publicity and promote his administration--but by pursuing his own ends in such calculated and extensive ways he reduced other potential values of the press conference, too often at the expense of the press and the American public. (Author/HTH)

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LYNDON JOHNSON'S PRESS CONFERENCES

Stephen Cooper

Department of Speech

Louisiana State University

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LYNDON JOHNSON'S PRESS CONFERENCES

The presidential press conference has evolved in the twentieth century as a significant tool of leadership. It has become such an institutionalized form of communication that a contemporary president could hardly avoid at least occasional meetings with reporters without suffering criticism, especially from the press.

From Woodrow Wilson through Jimmy Carter chief executives have used the news conference, with varying degrees of success, to promote the aims of their administrations. Since Eisenhower, the use of television has made this press situation potentially more significant than in the first half of the century. The press conference also commands attention because of its frequency, for presidents commonly meet with reporters fairly regularly, anywhere from FDR's twice a week record to Carter's average of once or twice monthly.

The news conference serves the president, the press, and the public. A president can use the conference to inform and to persuade in many and sometimes subtle ways because of the control he exerts over timing, length, style, and content. The chief executives who probably used the conference with greatest success were Franklin Roosevelt and John Kennedy. William Rivers argues that FDR, whose conferences were not broadcast, actually preferred reaching the

public through the press more than with his "Fireside Chats."[1] Rivers shows that during the period of 1933-36, FDR broadcast only eight Fireside Chats, but held 345 news conferences.[2] Kennedy, the first president to allow live television broadcasts, regarded the news conference as "the primary communications arm" of his administration.[3] That all recent presidents have participated in the evolution of this means of communicating with the press and ultimately the people attests to the importance of the press conference.

What Clinton Rossiter calls "the most influential channel of public communication to and from the President" also serves the American press.[4] First, almost any presidential communication automatically generates content for stories in both print and broadcast media, which are often important or interesting enough for front page or detailed coverage. Second, the question and answer period permits journalists to seek clarification or new material. Third, the news conference allows reporters to exert influence as "the fourth estate" by challenging the president, offering conflicting viewpoints through questions, and by serving as a "check and balance" on the presidency.[5]

The presidential press conference also serves the citizenry. The sessions can provide new information as well as background detail.[6] Especially when broadcast, they give voters opportunities to monitor the effectiveness of elected leaders.[7] Further, the sessions may stimulate interest in governmental affairs.

Although students of journalism and mass media have examined the nature of the presidential press conference and the practices of most presidents in dealing with reports, this study is believed to be the first detailed rhetorical analysis of a chief executive's use of this leadership tool. For this reason comparisons with other presidents cannot easily be made. As other studies are done, especially treatments of other presidents by scholars in speech, it will be possible to develop comparative data, to approach the news conference as a rhetorical genre, and to develop well grounded theoretical statements for critical use.

For this study actual transcripts of Lyndon Johnson's 135 official news conferences were analyzed to determine their persuasive components and impact.[8] Also studied were Johnson's attitudes toward the press and his habits in dealing with reporters. This essay considers Johnson's specific press conference practices, his opening statements, and his answers to questions as factors related to his own goals and the needs of the press and the public. His effectiveness, as gauged by such criteria as credibility, accessibility, responsiveness, newsworthiness, and general appropriateness, receives some attention. The primary purpose of this essay is to show President Johnson's rhetorical use of the presidential press conference.

Johnson's Relations With the Press

Because the ways in which the participants in a communication situation perceive each other influence the outcome of the communications attempted, it is important to discover something about the evolution and nature of Lyndon Johnson's attitudes toward and relationships with the press. One of Johnson's press secretaries suggested that LBJ seemed unable "to break habits formed in his youth" in dealing with reporters.[9]

While in the Senate Johnson developed a preference for small, informal, and private meetings with reporters.[10] When he was Majority Leader "his press conferences were fiascoes."[11] He apparently disliked the press conference approach, sometimes held surprise question and answer sessions, and favored daily briefings. He exercised strict control over these sessions.[12] A former aide and speech writer described them as follows: "The majority leader met with reporters for five minutes every morning at his desk in the Senate chamber before the lawmakers went into session. His custom was to read several brief written statements on subjects of his choosing (usually current legislative matters) and Reedy's composition. There would be no time for questions. Nor any need for them, in Johnson's opinion. The majority leader of the Senate had given them a basis for their stories. What more could they ask?"[13] Johnson discouraged inquiry unless the questions had been submitted

beforehand, criticized queries, and sometimes responded with "tart, sarcastic, and often unresponsive answers."[14]

Aside from his attempts to manage publicity, Senator Johnson also worried about his image and how to use the press to create an impression "of sincerity, of dedication, of standing above it all for the good of the country."[15] Another matter was LBJ's growing sensitivity to criticism, which became even more crucial during his presidency.[16] As Vice President, Johnson continued to meet with newsmen for "off-the record and background interviews."[17]

Three other factors may have influenced Johnson's attitudes and practices. First, observers have speculated that LBJ emulated Franklin Roosevelt's style with reporters.[18] In fact, according to Bill Moyers, one of Johnson's press secretaries, "He liked FDR's press conferences in the Oval Office around his desk, and was most comfortable in imitating them."[19] Second, Johnson's emerging distrust of reporters became concentrated on what he stereotyped as the "Eastern press."[20] Finally, Johnson probably so disliked and "feared" comparison with President Kennedy that he "resisted televised press conferences in the State Department Auditorium, where Kennedy had been successful."[21]

Johnson's presidential relations with the news media probably reflected well defined attitudes toward reporters and how he perceived the role of the media. First, his reading and viewing habits proved his keen interest in the press. He read several papers and listened to or watched

a number of news broadcasts daily.[22] He even had two wire service teletypes in the Oval Office, which he frequently checked. Beyond keeping current, his close attention to the press reflected an equal interest in publicity for his programs, a matter of consciousness which dictated a number of practices with reporters. For example, like Kennedy, LBJ from time to time called or had aides phone individual newsmen to praise or criticize stories.[23]

Although at times Johnson enjoyed interacting with reporters, unlike Kennedy he generally avoided close relationships with them, and perhaps expected too much from them. Bill Moyers explained: "Like other Presidents he looked upon the press corps at the White House as an adjunct of the Office, a tool to help him advance his interests, almost as a member of the White House family. . . ."[25] Johnson expected aid from the press in promoting his administration and he remained highly sensitive to criticism, especially personal criticism. He also disliked speculation in the press. Further, "leaks" antagonized him so much that he would withhold appointments or policy changes which were reported before he was ready to announce them.[26] He often castigated reporters and retired from office with bitterness because of their treatment of the war in Viet Nam.[27]

Perhaps the key to understanding Johnson's dealings with the press lies in his desire to manipulate it. A recent biographer has quoted Johnson as saying, "Reporters are puppets. They simply respond to the most powerful strings . . .

There's only one sure way of getting favorable stories from reporters and that is to keep their daily bread--the information, the stories, the plans, and the details they need for their work--in your own hands, so that you can give it out when and to whom you want. Even then nothing's guaranteed, but at least you've got the chance to bargain."[28]

The President's attitudes toward the media helped determine his view of the role of the presidential press conference. Johnson regarded the news conference as his forum to convince the press, occasionally to prod congress, and to reveal new information.[29] However, he usually favored other means to reach his various audiences. With reporters he preferred informal, impromptu meetings. For example, he sat for 374 individual interviews with correspondents in just the first fifteen months he was in office.[30] With the public he sought more direct communication than the question and answer format permits. For instance, he developed the habit of making dramatic announcements, preempting national network television programs twenty-eight times in a three year period, not to mention numerous addresses to the nation.[31]

It is hardly surprising that Johnson disliked the formal, televised conferences. He believed those sessions chiefly served the media, not his office.[32] He was more at ease with the informal press conference in which he had more control than with the format Kennedy had used.[33]

Three habits stemmed from these attitudes. First Johnson exercised almost complete direction over when and how he met the press, usually disregarding suggestions from reporters and his own staff.[34] Second, he employed the tactics of secrecy and surprise in holding conferences. Third, he liked to experiment, which led to a variety of meetings and changes in techniques involving such matters as sitting, standing, walking, the use of lighting, contact lenses, teleprompters, lecterns, and microphones.[35]

Press Conference Practices

An examination of Johnson's news conference policies and practices reveals the facets which he controlled and how he attempted to manage the situation to serve his goals.

One of his choices was the kind of conference he held. Although he did allow the traditional, official meetings with newsmen, fewer than half were televised or taped for broadcast. A majority were impromptu and informal. What is not widely known is that in addition to the regular conferences, Johnson met with a few selected reporters almost daily, often for two or three hours at a time in off-the-record or background sessions. His Press Secretary, George Christian, thought that LBJ was "at his best" in this kind of meeting.[36]

Preparation was another factor. The President was generally prepared because he read daily several newspapers, the Congressional Record, government memoranda, and documents.[37] He planned specifically for the more formal meetings

scheduled in advance, which drew well prepared questioners. The White House staff and other government agencies assembled lists of anticipated questions, put together briefing books for answers, and made summaries for LBJ to study the night before a conference. Sometimes Johnson met with his advisors the next morning. Occasionally, to avoid error, he carried written notes and even read prepared replies on critical issues.[38] He was usually successful in guessing what reporters would ask.[39] Occasionally his staff "planted" questions with reporters before a conference to be sure certain topics were raised.[40]

The timing of the conferences gave Johnson another measure of control. His unpredictability in scheduling, leading to mostly impromptu meetings, probably resulted from his love of surprise. Kearns skeptically claims that LBJ was "determined to escape the well-informed and difficult questions that might result if sufficient time was allowed for preparation" by newsmen.[41] However, careful analysis of what Johnson did reveals more specific strategies. He timed many sessions to make important announcements, to refute criticisms of his administration, to promote pending legislation at crucial times, to gain personal publicity or even political advantage, and to explain current affairs. Another aspect of timing was Johnson's failure to hold conferences, sometimes for a month or more, when he did not want to submit to formal questioning on delicate matters.

Johnson also controlled other details of the news conferences, including time of day, day of the week, specific location, and regularity of holding the meetings. In general he liked to meet around midday, favored the last three days of the week, and preferred his office or some other White House room for his twice monthly meetings.

Clearly, Johnson's control of several situational variables seems to have been designed more to accomplish his own purposes than to accomodate reporters. The following sections show how LBJ controlled the content of the meetings to further his aims.

Opening Statements

Most recent presidents have opened their news conferences with a brief statement or announcement. Doing so more extensively than any recent chief executive, Johnson usually took from a fourth to over a half of the sessions with his opening statements, or "voluntaries." For this reason, and because many of the announcements were significant or dramatic, a close look at Johnson's voluntaries reveals another of his strategies with the press conference.

Topics

The topics of the opening statements help explain the rhetorical impact sought. Five categories emerge: Executive matters, domestic issues, foreign affairs, personal concerns, and miscellaneous items, in that order of frequency. In terms of executive matters, Johnson frequently

opened with an announcement about a presidential appointment or staff change; or he discussed his plans, activities, and decisions; or he presented reports on recent briefings or meetings. The President liked to focus attention on what he was doing, especially just after an important decision or action. For example, in various press conferences he announced Chief Justice Earl Warren's resignation, Ambassador Goldberg's resignation, Sargent Shriver's appointment, and General Westmoreland's appointment. On June 18, 1966, he used half the meeting to announce eleven resignations, appointments, and nominations.

Johnson often began a news conference with statements about domestic issues, especially during the early years of his presidency. In 1964 and 1965, for example, he frequently commented on the healthy state of the economy. Other themes included his analysis of congressional actions, pending legislation, and current affairs such as strikes, the space program, and domestic violence.

The last three areas of content in the voluntaries were relatively minor. He only occasionally brought up foreign affairs, items related to his personal or family life, or such miscellaneous matters as his press policies or partisan politics.

The President made the opening statements a primary determinant of the content of the whole conference. Reporters' questions, of course, also restricted the subjects discussed, but frequently the opening statements were important

enough to evoke many questions. In one substantial way the topics of press inquiry differed from what Johnson had emphasized in his voluntaries. While only about one in ten of his opening statements dealt with foreign affairs, reporters queried in this category more than in any other, and more than a third of all their questions over the years concerned foreign relations, especially the war in Viet Nam. Reasons for this discrepancy are suggested by Johnson's specific purposes in making such frequent and extensive introductory remarks.

Purposes

The President's specific goals in the press conferences were to inform, to publicize, to promote, to defend, to enhance his ethos, and to regulate the conferences. Often, a particular statement served more than one function.

Johnson frequently used his announcement time to discuss some new action or proposal. He provided new information and sometimes gave necessary explanations or background material. For instance, on August 3, 1967, just as the White House was releasing an important tax message to Congress, LBJ spent over half a press conference explaining the economic package.[42]

Publicity and promotion probably became even more important aims than informing. Johnson often opened conferences with remarks to draw attention to some new appointment or program, or even to help maintain public interest in

one of his proposals. In 1964, for example, at several news conferences he publicized the Voting Rights Bill, even before he submitted it to Congress. Promoting his "Great Society" programs also proved to be a favorite way to start a conference. Johnson included specific details, examples, and especially statistics to demonstrate economic growth and the benefits of his efforts. In a news conference on May 3, 1968, Johnson dramatically announced that Hanoi had agreed to meet for peace negotiations in Paris.

Sensitive to public criticism, LBJ occasionally used the news conference to defend his administration. He reacted to attacks on his press policies, to criticisms of his handling of the war in Southeast Asia, and to remarks of political opponents, including Barry Goldwater.

Another purpose of the voluntary was ethos enhancement. Many of Johnson's announcements showed him to be decisive and forceful as the nation's leader. The President also sought to increase the credibility of new appointees as well as existing staff members.

Evidently LBJ sometimes planned the voluntaries to guide the press conference itself. On such occasions, his remarks were so important that they led to most or all of the inquiry which followed. For example, on October 5, 1967, Johnson used an impromptu conference to explain his signing of an appropriations measure; all of the questions were stimulated by his lengthy announcement.

Techniques

Johnson's development in the opening statements included most of the traditional forms of support associated with informing, amplifying, and persuading. More interesting are the specific techniques he used in making his opening statements.

Johnson controlled the timing, frequency, and length of his statements to serve his purposes. He used the tactic of surprise announcements often, but remained unpredictable with voluntaries except for the fact that he almost always made some. Johnson must have viewed his own statements as the primary rationale for many of his meetings because they so often coincided with activities to which he wanted to call attention and because the voluntaries often took up so much of the time. Another guiding factor may have been secrecy, for LBJ almost always waited until he had completed a decision before inviting press inquiry. Current events, like a strike settlement, also led to prepared announcements.

Issue avoidance provided the President another tactic. He chiefly veered from personal matters and foreign affairs and favored discussing his executive actions and domestic issues. When Johnson did not want to discuss a topic with reporters he might bypass news conferences altogether, go directly to the public with a televised statement, begin press conferences without voluntaries, or begin conferences with unrelated topics. The war in Viet Nam was an issue Johnson gradually came to avoid. In 1967, for example, he

never opened a conference with a statement on the subject. During the crisis in the Dominican Republic in 1965, he avoided holding news conferences altogether during May, the principal period of United States military intervention in that country. What he chose to introduce or to stay away from was a matter of rhetorical strategy.

Like the technique of avoidance, Johnson also used anticipation in his opening statements. Surmising what the reporters would be asking about, he often started his sessions with comments designed to answer such questions before newsmen could speak. A related device was interjection. In several meetings Johnson inserted announcements or statements in the middle or near the end of the time period. He may have followed this practice because he forgot to earlier, to change the tone or subject matter in progress, or because a "planted" question failed to surface. Nevertheless, by anticipatory statements and interjected announcements he controlled the news conference.

A final technique was the use of guests and having joint conferences with other government officials who participated by answering questions. The guests helped Johnson by providing information and by showing support for this administration. Invited over the years were governors, presidential advisors, military leaders, cabinet members, envoys, and heads of other nations. For example, as the war in Southeast Asia escalated, LBJ held several joint conferences with officials like Averell Harriman, Robert

McNamara, and General William Westmoreland, who could help explain or promote his decisions regarding the war.

Effectiveness

Evaluating Johnson's effectiveness is using the opening statement at press conferences requires three points of view: the aims of the president, the roles of reporters, and the needs of the public. From the standpoint of presidential leadership many of his opening statements probably succeeded. That is, he frequently accomplished some of his goals, especially publicity, through his initiatives in the news conferences. Whether his voluntaries served the needs of the press and the public is more doubtful.

Depending on differing perceptions, reporters have several possible roles in the press conference. The most important is to get material for news releases. A second purpose, based on the theory of the fourth estate, is to represent the public to the government through inquiry.

In some ways Johnson catered to print and electronic media representatives by announcing newsworthy actions, decisions, and plans. Sometimes he provided probably useful data for interpretative pieces through his lengthy commentaries, although he usually refused to encourage reporters working on speculative stories.

In other ways many of Johnson's voluntaries as well as his peculiar techniques in using them seemed more adapted to his own interests than those of journalists. First, his

remarks often only restated or repeated earlier statements of policy and therefore lacked news value. Second, the frequently heavy promotional nature of numerous statements provided little news for reporters. Even less adaptive were his techniques. A major problem was the length of his voluntaries, which often left only a few minutes for questions. Also, because of LBJ's frequent and extensive opening remarks some reporters may have come to rely on Johnson's initiatives for materials or for the substance of questions. Johnson's practices probably discouraged the careful preparation of questions on major issues not only because of the impromptu manner of his conferences but also because of the controlling nature of his voluntaries. His habit of anticipating questions through voluntaries may have put the press in a passive role too often by usurping their initiative. The tactic of interjecting announcements in the middle of questioning may have postponed or prevented important questions on prior issues. The use of guests often limited the time available to query the President and often led to answers from guests which were more propagandistic than informative. Another problem was importance, for many of Johnson's announcements, if not most, could easily have been made through other channels like simple press releases, thus allowing reporters more time and more freedom with topics than LBJ's voluntaries usually permitted. Generally, the manipulative nature of his opening statements did little to encourage newsmen in their role as a fourth branch of government.

How public needs were met by Johnson's opening comments is more difficult to assess. He sometimes provided helpful information and background. The one-sided nature of his lengthy promotional statements not only spent valuable time but may have led to misleading public perceptions of important domestic and international matters. This bias proved especially true of his statements on the war in Viet Nam, which rarely added new information or insight for public understanding of the conflict and which did more to encourage hope for peace than to present a balanced appraisal. Had Johnson guided the conferences less with his announcements the public might have learned more and in more detail about the President's positions. Had Johnson been less secretive during periods of decision making, he might have permitted more public reaction to the alternatives he was considering. Had Johnson curtailed his announcements, the public might have gained more from probing questioning.

Answers

President Johnson's replies to questions provide the second major component for analyzing the content of the meetings. His responsiveness to inquiry may be understood through an examination of his purposes, styles of answering, and general effectiveness.

Purposes

Johnson's aims in answering the dozen or so questions in an average press conference were the same as the goals of

his voluntaries: to inform, the publicize, promote, and defend his administration, to improve his image, and to control the news conference. These purposes probably guided LBJ's replies more than reporters' goals did.

The manifestation of his desire to control the conference with his answers merits brief attention. Just as the President often wanted to regulate the flow of questions through his announcements and initial remarks he also used his answers to reporters' questions to govern the direction of inquiry. Although he rarely resorted to the "no comment" device, he frequently stimulated or discouraged lines of questioning, overtly or subtly. He might say, "I don't want to go into a general press conference," (August 18, 1964), or something else to limit areas of inquiry. Although Johnson invoked various rules for the use of his replies in off-the-record meetings with reporters, he almost never put prohibitions on the use of responses in his official press conferences. For this reason Johnson may have wanted to control carefully what he said by directing the questioning at the news conferences.

Reply Styles

Many of the President's answers employed the usual methods of oral development for exposition, amplification, and proof. Of course, how Johnson replied depended on a number of factors, such as his interest in the question and his preparation for particular items. He could be quite

general or minutely specific, brief or exhaustive. Fond of statistics, he used them often. He offered testimony frequently, quoting himself more than any other source. He turned to other methods, too, including visuals, and the variety in development was sometimes interesting.

Four styles of reply appear in Johnson's conferences: controlling, fencing with reporters, approaching, and avoiding.

Controlling replies were those answers which either anticipated or directed journalists' inquiry. Johnson anticipated answering some questions by preparing statements, reading answers aloud, interjecting answers, interrupting, and cutting off questions. The habit of interrupting reporters showed up in numerous conferences. Johnson sometimes wanted to show that he understood the questioner's intent, to correct an error, to stop the direction the question was taking, or to avoid the question altogether. With the directive answers LBJ attempted to limit inquiry by instructing and appealing to newsmen. For example, he sometimes directed reporters to consult other sources, said what kinds of question he wanted, suggested ways to interpret his answers, requested postponement of a question, asked for clarification, and encouraged follow-up.

A second tactic of response was fencing. Johnson enjoyed sparring with the newsmen. Many of his replies included remarks directed to the questioner and included interrupting, demanding sources, browbeating, humoring,

kidding and joking, arguing, counter questioning, correcting, and attacking questions or questioners. Although he used these devices more often in the non-broadcast sessions, his habitual fencing was not only frequent, but it left the impression that Johnson was sometimes abrupt, sarcastic, caustic, and relentless, if not defensive and even insecure. Sometimes the sparring technique was the only response to a question and sometimes it was just part of an answer. At times Johnson seemed to enjoy the debating, yet at other times he seemed impatient with or sensitive to the questions asked.

When Johnson wanted to answer a question he often seemed effective. He approached the query with preparation, enthusiasm, and directness. He went beyond a mere "yes" or "no," used supporting materials and appeals, provided background, and proved his points. Some replies resembled short speeches in structure and content, often requiring several minutes for completion. Others, however, were simply long and tedious, yielding no new information. In numerous conferences, broadcast and impromptu, LBJ capitalized on questions. Either misunderstanding or ignoring the reporter's point, he set out to accomplish his own aims.

The last style of response was avoidance, a tactic more often used than the direct, or approaching, style. President Johnson had three general ways to avoid direct reply: refusing to answer, referring the question to another source, and circumventing the issue. He eschewed saying

"no comment," preferring craftier dodges. Sometimes he put reporters off by labelling a question premature. Sometimes he openly discouraged questions, especially hypothetical or speculative ones. Occasionally he was curt. By referring questions to other sources he substituted evasion for substance. LBJ frequently referred reporters to his previous speeches, press releases, or news conferences. With circumvention, Johnson seemed to answer a question, but he failed to speak directly to the issue. To accomplish this he often shifted to another topic, substituted an answer on the general subject for a response to the specific inquiry, ignored the question and interjected an announcement, digressed, equivocated, groped for an answer, repeated or restated prior answers, rationalized, blamed others for failures, appealed to laughter, used semantic arguments, and "forgot." His adeptness at avoidance techniques permeated many of his press conferences because he varied his reply style.

Effectiveness

On balance, Johnson's answers to questions in his news conferences seemed self-serving and unresponsive. Although he often replied in a cogent, direct manner, he more frequently used his responses to meet his own aims, to spar with individual reporters, to give short speeches on favorite topics, to control questioning, and to evade. While Johnson may have enjoyed some sessions, he often showed little con-

cern for press needs and limited the potential of the press conference format to attain respectability as a means of communication from the standpoint of the press and the public.

First, his habit of answering question in ways designed to control what was asked and what might result was too frequent. By telling reporters what he thought they were or should be asking he probably discouraged inquiry. By directing reporters he became didactic, uninformative, and limited the scope of many sessions.

Second, his fencing with reporters, while often humorous and friendly, seemed excessive. This style of reply wasted time, avoided issues, and might have been more appropriate for his almost daily off-the-record meetings with small groups of newsmen. He seemed to overuse sarcasm and argument, and by his defensiveness he destroyed rapport with the reporters.

Third, even when he sought to respond to a question directly he often neglected the questioner's intent by replying with long, promotional, repetitious remarks. He substituted restatement for insight, generalities for news, emotional appeals for balanced analyses. Much like his public speeches, many answers resembled pep talks or mini-orations, usually paternalistic, less often revealing. At times his style made the news conference just one more part of a larger propaganda effort of the White House. And while it is the responsibility of a president to lead the nation

through various kinds of communication, LBJ abused the presidential press conference often with this manner of response.

Finally, an avoidance style, prevalent in many of President Johnson's replies, reduced the value of much inquiry. LBJ's frequent unresponsiveness was not surprising considering his attitudes toward the press, his public relations goals, and his practices of control, secrecy, and surprise. Nevertheless, his habitual avoidance of significant issues and the numerous evasions probably eroded his credibility and certainly reduced the usefulness of his news conferences. Notwithstanding national security, Johnson could have been more candid or at least could have appeared less evasive. He could have simply answered, "no comment," or "I don't know," or "I'd rather not discuss that today," instead of the obvious hedges so common in his answers. When he elevated evasion to the norm in many of his conferences he left reporters frustrated and the public unenlightened, and diminished the potential of his public communication.

Conclusion

This essay has presented a study of persuasion in the contemporary presidential news conference and an attempt to reveal Lyndon Johnson's attitudes toward the press, his policies and habits in meeting with reporters, his use of opening statements, and his answers to reporters' questions.

Each factor reflected his successes and failures in the presidential press conference.

Because Johnson understood well the publicity value of American and world print and electronic news media, he sought to exploit them. He saw reporters as "torchbearers" for his programs, consequently he used the press conference chiefly for promotional purposes. Although he met with reporters often, through the impromptu nature of most of his press conferences he probably discouraged thorough preparation by attending newsmen and too many times he denied public access and scrutiny which broadcast conferences afford.[43] Third, he overused the prerogative of the opening statement through excessive length and by narrowing the scope of possible inquiry. Lastly, he limited his effectiveness because of his frequent unresponsiveness through controlling, fencing, and evading. While he was able to give useful answers and often did, he usually failed to respond directly to newsmen and generally let his own purposes in the news conference dominate. In general, President Johnson probably was effective in using the press conference to satisfy his own aims, expecially to gain publicity and to promote his administrative programs. But by pursuing his own ends in such calculated and extensive ways he reduced other potential values of the presidential press conference, too often at the expense of the press and the American public.

[1]William L. Rivers, The Opinionmakers (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), pp. 136-7.

[2]Ibid., p. 137.

[3]Harry W. Sharp, Jr., "The Kennedy News Conference," Diss. Purdue 1967, p. 1.

[4]Clinton Rossiter, The American Presidency, rev. ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1960), p. 114.

[5]Fauneil J. Rinn, "The Presidential Press Conference," in The Presidency, ed. Aaron Wildavsky (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1969), pp. 330-332. Also see Fauneil Rinn, "The Presidential Press Conference as a Communication Process," Studies in Public Communication, 1 (Summer 1957), 6-10; and James E. Pollard, "The White House News Conference as a Channel of Communication," Public Opinion Quarterly, 15 (Winter 1951-52), 677. For an insightful treatment of the relationship of reporters and presidents in the news conference, see C. Jack Orr, "Reporters Confront the President: Sustaining a Counterpoised Situation," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 66 (February 1980), pp. 17-32.

[6]See Emory S. Bogardus, "Sociology of the Presidential TV Press Conference," Sociology and Social Research, 46 (Jan. 1962), 181.

[7]Rinn, "The Presidential Press Conference," pp. 332-333.

[8]According to Bill Moyers (letter, February 7, 1972) and George Christian (interviews, May 26, 1971 and August 19, 1971) the transcripts released by the White House were rarely edited except for grammar.

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[11]Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, Lyndon B. Johnson: The Exercise of Power (New York: New American Library, 1966), p. 106.

[12]Personal interview with Sam Wood, Editor, (Austin) American-Statesman, Aug. 17, 1971; and personal interview with Richard Morehead, Capitol Bureau Chief, Dallas Morning News, Aug. 16, 1971.

[13]Booth Mooney, LBJ: An Irreverent Chronicle (New York: Crowell, 1976), p. 162. Also see Rivers, pp. 167-8.

[14]Mooney, p. 163. Also see Robert Sherrill, The Accidental President (New York: Grossman, 1967), p. 39.

[15]Mooney, p. 166.

[16]Jack Bell, The Johnson Treatment: How Lyndon B. Johnson Took Over the Presidency and Made It His Own (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), p. 139; and Theodore H. White, The Making of the President, 1964 (New York: Signet, 1965), pp. 71-72.

[17]Bell, p. 139.

[18]Interview with Sam Wood; and L. L. L. Golden, "The President and the Press," Saturday Review, May 8, 1965, p. 65.

[19]Letter from Bill Moyers to the writer, Feb. 7, 1972.

[20]Philip Geyelin, Lyndon B. Johnson and the World (New York: Praeger, 1966), p. 125; and Bell, p. 140. Johnson confirmed his almost paranoid perception of the Eastern news establishment in his memoirs, The Vantage Point (New York: Holt, 1971), pp. 96-97.

[21]Moyers, letter; and Tom Wicker, "Johnson Seeks Policy on Press," New York Times, Feb. 9, 1964, sec. IV, p. 8. Also see Bell, p. 145; and Mooney, p. 177.

[22]Christian, p. 187; and Harry Provence, Lyndon B. Johnson: A Biography (New York: Fleet, 1964), pp. 156-157; and Geyelin, p. 34.

[23]Christian, p. 7; and Ben H. Bagdikian, "Washington Letter: JFK to LBJ; Paradoxes of Change," Columbia Journalism Review, 2 (Winter 1964), 36.

[24]Liz Carpenter, Ruffles and Flourishes (New York: Pocket Books, 1970), p. 86; and Ben H. Bagdikian, "Washington Letter: JFK to LBJ: Parodoxes of Change," Columbia Journalism Review, 2 (Winter 1964), 36; and Pierre Salinger, With Kennedy (New York: Avon, 1966), pp. 416-417.

[25]Moyers, letter.

[26]Daniel P. Moynihan, "The Presidency and the Press," Commentary, Mar. 1971, p. 44.

[27]Johnson, The Vantage Point, p. 96 and p. 384.

[28]Doris Kearns, Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), p. 247.

[29]Moyers, letter; and personal interview with George Christian, May 26, 1971; also see James Reston, The Artillery of the Press (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), pp. 52-53. Johnson's attitudes were probably typical of other presidents who have sought to use the news conference to their advantage.

[30]Hugh Sidey, A Very Personal Presidency: Lyndon Johnson in the White House (New York: Atheneum, 1968), p. 117; and Joseph Kraft, "Politics of the Washington Press Corps," Harper's, June 1965, p. 104.

[31]Glen D. Phillips, "The Use of Radio and Television by Presidents of the United States," Diss. Michigan 1968, pp. 307-8; also see Newton Minow, John Barlow Martin, and Lee M. Mitchell, Presidential Television (New York: Basic Books, 1973), pp. 44-47.

[32]Moyers, letter.

[33]Lyndon B. Johnson, The Choices We Face (New York: Bantam, 1969), p. 138.

[34]Christian, interview; and Moyers, letter.

[35]See John D. Pomfret, "The President and the Press: Their Relationship Continues to be Uneasy," New York Times, Feb. 28, 1966, p. 13.

[36]Personal interview with George Christian, Aug. 19, 1971.

[37]Moyers, letter; and Christian, interview, May 26, 1971; also see Lyndon B. Johnson, broadcast interview, Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Lyndon B. Johnson, 1963-64 (Washington, D.C.; GPO, 1965), v. 1, p. 365; and Christian, The President Steps Down, p. 6.

[38]Moyers, letter; Christian, interviews; and Christian, The President Steps Down, p. 199.

[39]Christian, interview, Aug. 19, 1971; and G. R. Berdes, Friendly Adversaries: The Press and Government (Marquette University: Center for the Study of the American Press, 1969), pp. 35-36.

[40]Phillips, pp. 38-39.

[41]Kearns, p. 248. Ms. Kearns erroneously asserts (p. 248) that most of Johnson's conferences took place on weekends. Only a fourth of them did, and of these only four were held on Sundays.

[42]All references to Johnson's press conferences are to the transcripts published in the Public Papers, cited earlier, 10 vols. (1965-70).

[43]Johnson, after leaving the presidency, admitted that he "should have held more regular televised news conferences." See The Choices We Face, p. 138.